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Some enigmatic phenomena of the East, Central and West Sahara

A. Triliths.

Since a connection between veiled Tibu of Tibesti and strange low three-legged tables built of stone seemingly fascinated a British governor of Bornu Province in Nigeria (Palmer 1936: 122ff), I propose to start with these in an attempt to update our scant knowledge hitherto. Such stone tables, or triliths, consist basically of a top slab supported on three “legs” or orthostats whose common dimensions may be about knee- or waist-height with a diameter of 40 – 100 cm across the top of the flat slab (Fig. 1). Higher examples do occur.

In 1935 a French officer, Lieut. Réquin, published a non-illustrated account of how a Tibu murderer could flee onto a mountain and perform rites involving a trilith plus a sacrificed goat. Such were believed to protect him from all pursuit.

Going back further in time it was mentioned that a chief in Tibesti would light a fire beneath a trilith and then sit down on it when he took up office (Palmer 1936: 122-123 & 202-203). It is not recounted how long he was obliged to remain in such a position. However no man was supposed to approach the fire unless he was veiled. Another practice recounted was to light a fire beneath a trilith, to check which way the smoke drifted and then to accept that direction as the best one in which to undertake a raid.

It does not look as though Palmer ever visited Tibesti. It is also possible that his informants deliberately or unwittingly misled him. Yet it seems improbable that such stories would have been invented to pander to the passion for history of an influential foreign dignitary, thus possibly gaining favours for people in his entourage. It has often been said that “there is no smoke without fire.”

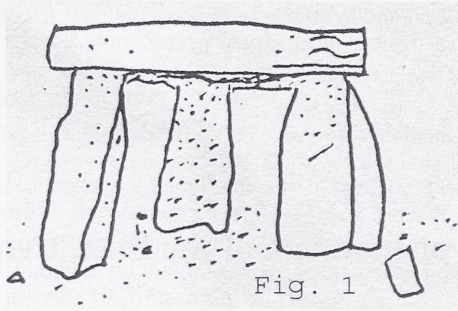


Fig. 1. Trilith (Drawing by John Godwin).

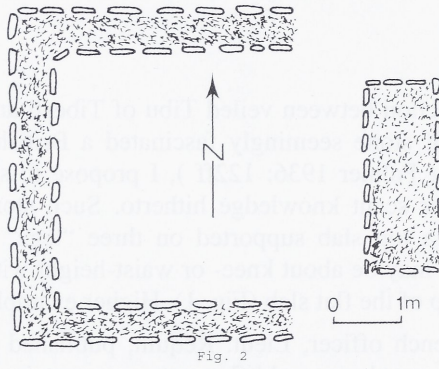


Fig. 2. "Basket-handle" or "Fatima Tent."

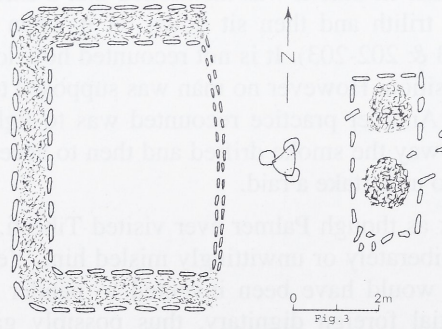


Fig. 3. Trilith placed between a "Basket-Handle" and its associated annex to east.

Coming now to a simple reason for building triliths, such objects are held by one source to have been erected as markers of territory (Claudot-Hawad 1993: 63). But what should one think of two triliths standing side by side? Or a line of small ones, each comprised of only two upright stones (orthostats) joined by a flat stone on top of them? I once saw such a line running uphill and roughly aligned on the peak of Garet-el-Djenoun in Tefedest.

When a central Saharan trilith is positioned among a group of funerary monuments or even directly within the confines of an enigmatic (and probably medieval) structure like a so-called “Basket-Handle” or “Fatima Tent” (Fig. 2), its presence and function as a marker of territory become harder to explain.

Some Air triliths of unstated location in Niger consisted of three pillars set upright “on the plan of an equilateral triangle” (Rennell Rodd 1932: 139) and it seems that the author was told that these were Islamic places of prayer. A game is mentioned by Palmer (1936:202) in which Tuareg youths place a boulder on top of any suitable trilith. Meanwhile I saw some very new-looking triliths in Ahaggar during the 1980s whose flattish cover-stones, far from being boulders, were of only moderate size and weight. This could indicate that some unknown use still continues.

In Fig. 3 is a sketch of a trilith set between a “Basket-Handle” and its accompanying stone-built “annex” to the east. It can also be positioned between the “arms” of the main structure, i.e., to west of the low line of stones a-b; to judge by examples observed hitherto, this latter stone line is only present in company with a trilith. It now becomes hard not to suspect indulgence in certain rites or superstitions. Whether those participating were veiled or not is unknown; however such composite monuments occur directly within the territory of the veiled Ahaggar Tuareg.

Triliths have also been seen in Mauritania (Hachid 2000: 266) and a collapsed stone table with at least four legs once caught my attention during the 1970s not far from the Mauritanian frontier-post of Aïn ben Tili. We know that there used to be veiled men in that general area too.

I am greatly indebted to B. Gabriel for two photos taken by him in 1966 in Enneri (=Wadi Dirennao, Tibesti. For an overview of Dirennao see Gabriel (1977). He is seemingly the first European to have photographed objects similar to those reported by Réquin (1935) and deserves all credit for having done so (Gabriel 1972; Herrmann & Gabriel 1972: Abb. 12). At least one author appeared to think that it was I who had initially drawn attention to triliths (Hachid 2000: 266). However such is clearly not the case.

The triliths “were associated with small round stone platforms (on which sacrificial animals were probably killed) and with half open stone cists and slabs”

(B. Gabriel, in litt., 16 Nov 05). These are visible in Fig. 4, along with the actual trilith in the left centre portion of the picture.



Fig. 4. Trilith and associated remains in Enneri Dirennao, Tibesti. (Photo B. Gabriel)

Speaking now of the far side of the Eastern Sahara, A.J.Arkell mentions Tuareg introduced into Darfur to look after the newly-arrived camel. He asserts that their traditions indicate that such Tuareg came from Arabia, though regrettably without saying which traditions are involved. (Arkell 1973: 198-1999). However Arabia and Iran are not so far apart and elsewhere I have attempted to suggest the possibility of a connection with the veiled Atravan (fire-priests) of the Zoroaster cult in Iran, (Milburn, 1993: 40; 2005: 54). These are shown in an

illustration reproduced by Burckhardt-Brandenberg (1931: Table V, no. 5). The faces of such men are supposed to have been veiled so as to prevent their impure breath sullyng the sacred fire while making sacrifices (Anon, 1890: 969).

B. Hunting complexes.

In past years in the eastern Sahara considerable interest has been shown in "game-chutes" for capturing animals and birds (Hester & Hobler 1969; Riemer, 2004.). Even allowing for various uncertainties as to function of various apparent component parts of such complexes, it looks as though the general principle of long low walls, coming to an end with only a narrow gap between them, was used to channel game creatures into walled-in areas or pits in which they could be captured or killed. One can read that running gazelles, when frightened, tend to follow along rather than to cross an obstacle in their path (Hester & Hobler., 1969: 64).

Natural terrain could also be used to achieve the same result. Sites could be arranged to encompass existing paths followed by game animals and birds, a phenomenon only too evident in wooded areas in Europe to-day, especially during snowy conditions. The trails used by deer, for instance, often run quite close to those frequented by humans and parallel to them. At a seemingly exceptional site in the central Sahara some years ago this exploitation of suitable terrain was only too evident (Milburn and Wunderlich 1992); camels and donkeys, overtly dependent on local pasture and water rather than frequent human assistance, were observed following trails which passed through such an ancient complex. Its builders had cunningly used available features in which to position at least two killing-areas, consisting of a number of walled "boxes" or "stalls" with parallel sides and to which nets might have been affixed. It seemed to me highly probable that driven game creatures would not have seen such killing-areas until the very last moment. They might also have been chivvied into the "boxes" by skilled hunters adjacent to these.

In Fig. 5 visible animal trails pass through the area, with game seemingly having been chased from north to south, travelling from left to right within the clearly-visible "funnel" (marked by stone lines) until reaching the very dilapidated boxed-in "killing area" at the right edge of the picture.

This latter originally consisted of eight parallel-sided " boxes" or compartments, set together in a complex whose rough dimensions were 19.2 m long by 3.7 m wide, with outer walls of ca. 30 to 60 cm in height. The function of low piles of stones running across the mouth of the "funnel" is unknown. Another killing area was seen a short way to north, out of sight of that mentioned above. It consisted of nine "boxes." It is possible that the builders relied on the southern killing area to catch any game which got past the northern one.

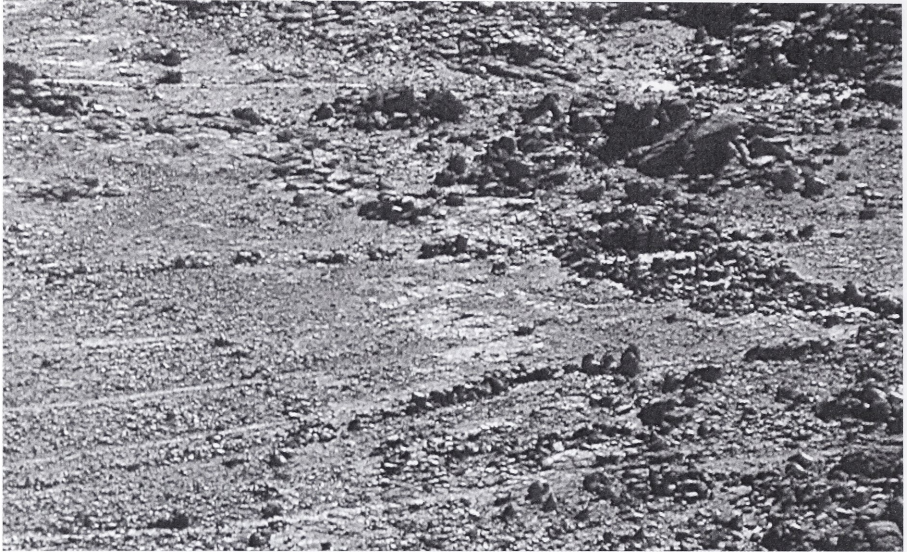


Fig. 5. In this part of the hunting complex, game seemingly travelled from left to right, ending in the boxed-in “killing area” at the right edge of the picture.

However so many stone piles are to be found in the general area of the complex, which is some hundreds of metres in length, that it is difficult not to conclude that a good many changes, perhaps improvements, may have been made over a long period. Should circumstances permit, I would welcome another visit to this highly-complex site in company with others better able than myself to evaluate certain enigmatic structural details overall.

In the early 1980s in the Djado area of northern Niger I chanced upon a single low wall placed along the edge of an escarpment. Since I had not by then heard of such devices for hunting, my attention was probably soon attracted by some other antiquity and I recall no details. But its function could have been to prevent game descending from the escarpment.

A French officer has recounted the existence of long low walls in the Saoura region of Algeria, as well as further north (Martin 1930: 196). He states that the ostrich-hunters have vanished long ago and that all that remains are the strange lines of stones found in the mountains of the Saoura; their purpose was held to have been to oblige driven ostriches to pass either close to a hunter or into a trap. The late Dominique Champault also told me of having seen such walls during her ethnological work there.

Thus, in spite of certain gaps in current knowledge of some aspects of hunting complexes, it seems clear that such walls, ending with only a narrow gap between them, are difficult to explain as anything other than a system for guiding animals or birds into areas in which they can be killed or captured (Cf. Gabriel 2003: 30). Their use will have dwindled with the introduction of accurate fire-arms (compare various forms of hunting practised during the 19th century; Daumas 1858). Once automatic weapons came to the desert, their presence signalled the death-knell of many types of game creatures and the consequent total lack of them in many areas where they formerly thrived.

Finally it remains to express sincere gratitude and appreciation of Lech Krzyzaniak, who did so much to further our knowledge and understanding of desert archaeology. It was always fun to be with him and one became so easily affected by his boundless enthusiasm and gaiety. I wish that he could have seen these notes before they appear in print. Most probably he would have suggested some changes and additions of which I have not thought. His remarks would inevitably have been interlaced with humorous asides and as a result one would have been grateful, as ever, for the benefit of his huge knowledge and experience and his generosity in sharing it with others.

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